11-2016

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Anne Mayne
avmlaa@iafrica.com

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Recommended Citation

Mayne, Anne (2016) "Exit by Grizelda Grootboom," *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2016.01.01.04>

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**BOOK REVIEW: *EXIT!* BY GRIZELDA GROOTBOOM
BLACKBIRD BOOKS, JOHANNESBURG, 2016, 200 PAGES**

Anne Mayne

Cape Town, South Africa

KEYWORDS

South Africa, prostitution, sex trafficking, survivor memoir, apartheid, sex industry, rape, forced abortion, Methodist Church

GRIZELDA GROOTBOOM introduced her autobiography at the Book Lounge in Cape Town by explaining what the title “Exit” meant to her. She said when she was in the various brothels she would see the EXIT sign above the door that the men would leave by and she would long to leave too and enter the other world they so easily stepped into.

Grootboom’s book is compulsive reading and after closing it, her story continues to haunt me. I am now more fully aware of the other frightening world that exists in the backstreets, brothels and strip clubs of South African cities.

Later I met Grizelda again at the Embrace Dignity (<http://embrace.dignity.org.za/>) office in Cape Town, where I had come to view the exhibition of photographs of prostituted women who have been helped by the organization. The impact of just having read Grizelda’s life story caused me to feel speechless and overwhelmed, it was like being in the presence of a super woman! What kind of woman has the strength to overcome abandonment as a young child, survival on the streets of one of the most violent cities in the world, trafficking, multiple rapes and assaults, sexual slavery and forced abortion? Moreover, there she stood before me in the office, this large, beautiful, laughing woman alive, warm, friendly and sane! Not many people are capable of surviving what she has. Her life story is testimony to amazing human strength. She navigated her way through hell and is alive today to tell the story.

Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, the founder of Embrace Dignity and long-standing women’s rights activist, supported Grootboom throughout the telling of her story to Carol Martin. Clearly, the care and understanding of these two women, which Grizelda acknowledges, helped her to share this terrible story.

Exit exposes the ruthless savagery of the perpetrators of sex trafficking and of the sex buyers who use the women and girls in the sex industry. Grootboom’s courage to give testimony to her extreme abuse is such an important achievement because she describes in detail this criminal underworld. Few victims of these crimes against women survive, and even if they do, they seldom have the strength to re-live and record their traumatic experiences.

The description of Grizelda's childhood with her father in her great grandparents' house in Woodstock, South Africa, is vivid and colorful. When she turned eight, first her great grandfather was killed—hit by a car—and then her vibrant, talented, enterprising great grandmother died of heart failure, her father lost his job, the house was demolished, and Grizelda was abandoned to the streets. She took to living under bridges with other abandoned children while she never stopped looking for her mother and her father. Nobody came looking for her!

The year that Grizelda turned eight—1988—was the height of the struggle against Apartheid. The Apartheid system in South Africa, which disenfranchised, segregated and excluded black people from comprehensive education and limited them to menial work and low wages, created dysfunctional people with a lack of sense of self-worth. Grizelda's close relatives—her father, uncle and aunt—who lived in her house suffered from extreme poverty, joblessness and lack of resources.

By the time Grizelda turned 18, Apartheid was being dismantled and President Mandela presided over a hopeful "Rainbow Nation." However, the new freedom also included the welcoming in of the sex industry, which was mistakenly thought to be part of the newfound liberation. The liberalized censorship laws caused the sex industry to blossom above ground. For the first time in South African history, brothels, sex clubs and pornography shops popped up over night, bank rolled by the sex industry moguls from USA, Europe and Australia. They were scrambling over each other to open up this great new market, even the checkout corridors of supermarkets were encouraged to line their shelves with displays soft pornography magazines.

The sex industry's strip clubs, brothels, pornography production studios needed the fodder of thousands of poor young girls many of them black. The victims were easy pickings, especially after the saturation bombing of the pornography magazines and the stories of the great money to be made by selling sex. The pornography industry performed the task of grooming these young women into the sex.

A pimp's recruiting agent who Grizelda thought was a friend encouraged her to go to Johannesburg and look for work. When she arrived, she was sold to an extremely violent pimp. This was the first of three times that she was trafficked.

Her journey into the depths of hell is horrifying; her ability to snatch some fun out of the chaos is testimony to her strength of personality. Her life became saturated with drugs to dull the pain, anger and disgust. In a drugged state, she found the stripping and pole-dancing quite amusing and enjoyed the impact she was able to make by showing off her own eye-catching choreography. She didn't care that the men watching her saw her as merely a sex object to be used and discarded.

After a numerous violent experiences, some of which left her seriously injured and one, which nearly killed her, she gravitated towards drug rehabilitation and spiritual healing via a Johannesburg Methodist Church. She began to learn to function more as a contributor. She who had been preyed on and used and abused most of her life now sought to heal, to find a way of living with, as she says "wholesomeness," learning to face up to her traumas, take responsibility for herself and to give her little son a "...healthy environment with love and proper caring and a sense of purpose."

I believe that the strength of her great grandmother ran in her genes. Her intelligence and resourcefulness pulled her through.

Exit is a significant contribution towards making South Africa a more wholesome society. It is such a brave and honest look into the horrors of prostitution and sex trafficking, as well as the residual horrors of the apartheid system that caused people to treat each other with such utter disrespect.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Anne Mayne is founding member of the Cape Town Feminists (1973), the Cape Town Rape Crisis (1976), and Cape Town's first battered women's shelter (1986). While living in London (1988 to 1999), she worked with Women's Environmental Network and the Campaign Against Pornography. While working with a research team at the Institute for Child and Family Development at the University of the Western Cape, she co-wrote "Child Victims of Prostitution in the Western Cape" with Dr. Roseline Bares-September, Ingrid Brown-Adam, Danielle Kowen, and Geraldine Dyason. She is the author of "The Power of Pornography: A South African Case Study" in *Big Porn, Inc.: Exposing the Harms of the Global Pornography Industry* (Melinda Tankard Reist and Abigail Bray (Eds). Spinifex Press. 2011. Email: avmlaa@iafrica.com

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Mayne, Anne. (2016). Book review: *Exit!* by Grizelda Grootboom. *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation*. Vol. 1, Issue 1, Article 4. DOI:10.23860/dignity.2016.01.01.04. Available at <http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol1/iss1/4>.